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MISPILLION LIGHTHOUSE

HAER NO. DE-23

South bank of Mispillion River at its confluence with  
Delaware River at northeast end of Country Road 203,  
7 mi. east of Milford

Milford Vicinity

Sussex County

Delaware

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service

Northeast Region

Philadelphia Support Office

200 Chestnut Street

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

MISPILLION LIGHTHOUSE

HAER No. DE-23

**Location:** South bank of Mispillion River at its  
confluence with Delaware River at  
northeast end of County Road 203,  
7 mi. east of Milford  
Milford Vicinity  
Sussex County  
Delaware

UTM: 18.472660.4310760  
Quad: Mispillion River,  
Delaware

**Date of Construction:** 1873. Expanded 1875.

**Present Owner:** Eugene and Suzanne Racz  
R. D. 1, Box 417  
Mispillion Lighthouse Road  
Milford, Delaware 19963

**Present Use:** Unoccupied and unused except for  
miscellaneous storage.

**Significance:** Mispillion Lighthouse is the  
sole surviving wood-frame  
lighthouse in Delaware and is  
one of only three Delaware Bay  
lighthouses still standing on  
Delaware soil.

**Project Information:** This short form report was  
prepared in September, 1989  
under a grant from the  
Bicentennial Lighthouse Fund,  
administered by the National  
Park Service and the Delaware  
Bureau of Archaeology & Historic  
Preservation. This report was  
made in conjunction with  
recordation drawings and large  
format photographs.

Michael Johannes Paul  
Gredell & Paul, Consulting  
Structural Engineers  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Mispillion Lighthouse is the third in a series of four lights that have been located on the salt marsh site on the south bank of the mouth of the Mispillion River. The first lighthouse, erected in 1831, collapsed from erosion of its foundations. The second lighthouse was decommissioned in 1859, when the river was judged to be relatively unnavigable, and the lighthouse was moved to the town of Milford. The existing third lighthouse, constructed in 1873, was decommissioned in 1929 and replaced by a steel frame tower. The tower, which remains on a government owned portion of the now private site, is still operated by the U. S. Coast Guard.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the lights at the Mispillion River were operated primarily to guide smaller vessels that sailed locally along the coast into the inlet to the inland port of Milford and several intermediate, downstream landings. The lights also were used by larger, sea faring vessels to mark progress up the Delaware Bay and River to major ports such as Philadelphia and Camden. With the development of modern navigation systems and advances in ship building, the lights at Mispillion in the twentieth century have been of diminishing significance to the large, ocean going vessels that travel the Delaware River. Presently, the light (on the steel tower) again is used primarily to guide local pleasure craft through the inlet.

Originally manned by a keeper, Mispillion Lighthouse was partially automated in 1911 when the oil-fired light was replaced by an acetylene gas lamp supplied from tanks in nearby outbuildings. Nonetheless, a caretaker was retained to live in the structure to deter vandalism.

The existing Mispillion Lighthouse was erected in 1873, for \$5,000, to reestablish a beacon at this site. In 1875 the lighthouse was expanded for an additional \$5,000. In 1877 the site was protected with a surrounding dike, which was damaged in storms of the following year. Dike repairs and a roadway to the site were constructed in 1879. Nearly every year from 1873 through 1910, the site required and received additional protection against the ravages of coastal storms and the encroachment of surrounding marsh. Bushels of oyster shell fill, tons of stone rip rap, and a series of bulkheads fought natural forces and continually reshaped the site to bring it to its present configuration. The lighthouse now shares its expanded site with the steel tower and several mid twentieth century buildings, which are used in the operation of a commercial marina. The bank of the Mispillion River is lined with a modern timber pier that extends from an agglomeration of earlier bulkheads.

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Mispillion Lighthouse is a two story, L-shaped house with a tower nested in the intersection of the wings. The overall dimensions of the lighthouse are 24'-11" by 29'-1" in plan, and 48'-8" from grade to the top of the lantern. The tower is 8'-4" square in plan, with an octagonal lantern on top. Roofs on the wings of the house are simple gables.

Roofs, floors, exterior walls, and interior partitions are sawed wood framing. The first floor rests on brick piers that are supported by timber grillage on top of timber piles. Most exterior walls of the two wings of the house are covered with painted composition shingles over wood clapboard over board sheathing. Tower walls are covered with unpainted wood shingles. The iron lantern is supported on a wood frame base. Former first story porches, as shown in historic photographs, are removed from the front and rear of the building.

Two brick chimneys rise above the house roofs. One chimney is partially collapsed; the other has a vaulted cap, which may be original. Wood trim fascia, eave brackets, collar ties, and king posts adorn the gable end walls, which are finished with board and batten siding. Simple wood trim surrounds the wood windows and doors. The windows do not appear to be original. The base of the lantern is covered with painted sheet metal. Glass remains in only a few of the lantern lights; some are filled with metal panels and one is empty. A decorative iron globe ventilator and metal weather vane, probably original, surmount the lantern.

All wall and ceiling finishes are removed from the interior of the house. Tower walls are finished with painted, beaded board paneling, as is the wainscot of the lantern base. No lenses or lamp equipment remain in the lantern.

Major alterations, in addition to apparent replacement of the windows, removal of the porches, and gutting of the interior, include removal of the interior house stair, which is replaced by a rough ladder, and removal of the lantern gallery, associated brackets, and railing.

The structure is presently in fair to good condition, with some water damage from persistent roof leaks. The exterior finishes are in poor to fair condition. The building is presently used for miscellaneous storage on the first floor.

Mispillion Lighthouse is constructed in a "stick gothic" style that is distinctive of a type and period of architecture important to the history of Delaware. Its site was once owned by Delaware Governor Charles Polk. The history of Mispillion Lighthouse, including the two previous lighthouses and the

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existing steel tower -- all on the same site, depicts the development of aids to navigation in the Delaware Bay. The development of the site itself, with constant damage and efforts at protection, illustrates the changing nature of the fragile shoreline.

The following sources were used in preparing this report and would be valuable in further research:

"Nomination Form," National Register of Historic Places, prepared by the Sussex County Preservation Office, January, 1986, for the National Park Service, Washington, D. C.

"Clipping File," Annual Reports, Lighthouse Board, 1857-1907, National Archives, Record Group 26, Records of the U. S. Coast Guard, Washington, D. C.

"Description of Light-House Tower, Mispillion River Light Station, December 5, 1907," Lighthouse Establishment of the Department of Commerce and Labor, National Archives, Record Group 26, Records of the U. S. Coast Guard, Washington, D. C.

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The following was taken from: "Clipping File," Annual Reports, Lighthouse Board, 1857-1907,  
National Archives, Record Group 26, Records of the U.S. Coast Guard, Washington, DC

Authorized by act of Congress, Mar. 3, 1831,	\$1,500.
" to re-establish; - June 10, 1872,	5,000.
" for keeper's dwell. June 23, 1874,	5,000.
" to protect site - July 31, 1876,	4,000.

1837. "Mispillion Creek, south side of Delaware Bay, Del. Established in 1831, refitted in 1855; 5th-order lens. Light on keeper's dwelling. White tower, 38 ft. above sea-level."  
(From "List of Light-houses, &c., 1857.")  
1848. ("List of Light-houses, &c., 1848," "Light on keeper's dwelling; removed & rebuilt in 1843.")

An. Rep. "Since July 1, 1854, lenses have been introduced into this district, as follows:  
1855. At Mispillion, a 5th-order of 180°, in place of six lamps."

1857. It is reported that the light at Mispillion, in Delaware Bay, is unnecessary even for the local interests of that vicinity. It is located at the mouth of Mispillion creek, which has at its entrance a depth of only one foot water at low tides. Only a few small flat bottomed vessels run in and out of this creek. For the general navigation of the bay this light is useless, and its discontinuance is respectfully recommended.

1872. Mispillion, Delaware Bay.—Congress, at its last session, appropriated \$5,000 for re-establishing the small light house at this point, and it will be commenced at an early day.

1873. 232. Mispillion, Delaware Bay.—The structure authorized by the act of Congress re-establishing the light has been erected, and the light exhibited. It is in Delaware Bay near the mouth of Mispillion River, and was completed and lighted for the first time on the 15th of June, 1873. The light is a fixed white light of the sixth order of the system of Fresnel, and is shown from a wooden frame tower, connected with the dwelling of the keeper, both colored gray, with the exception of the lantern on the tower, which is black. The focal flame is 48 feet above the water.

1874. 235. Mispillion Creek light station.—A special appropriation of \$5,000 was made at the last session of Congress "for the erection of keeper's dwelling" at this station. Designs have been prepared for additions to the present structure, and the work will be commenced at once.

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Mispillion Creek, Del.

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1875 240. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—At the date of the last annual report designs were in preparation for additions to the present structure under an appropriation made by act approved June 23, 1874. This work has been completed. The keeper's dwelling has been entirely remodeled, four good rooms having been added, and a good brick cistern built. This site is subject to overflow by the tide, and can only be protected by a properly constructed dike, which would cost about \$4,000.

1877 243. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—This station has been surrounded by a well-constructed earth-bank, four foot high, to keep out the water at high tide, and the sea-side of the bank has been faced with stone.

1878 241. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—The earth embankment surrounding the building, which was damaged by the storms and high tides, has been repaired, and the outer slope protected with stone, to prevent the wash of the sea. The water-pipes and gutters on the building have been repaired. The construction of the road authorized by the act of Congress approved July 31, 1876, has been commenced. The road will doubtless be finished during the present season.

1879 243. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—The repairs made necessary by the storm of October 23, 1878, have been completed. A roadway across the marsh was constructed.

1880 247. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—A new sill and door were placed in the lantern parapet, and a small window in the attic, to give light and ventilation to the loft. The water-cistern was repaired, and an earth bank thrown around it to prevent freezing. The front porch was repaired where damaged by the storm of October, 1878, and the structure painted inside and out. The edge of the marsh is approaching the bank surrounding the station, which should be protected by a row of piling or riprap, which will cost about \$1,200.

1883 253. Mispillion Creek, at the mouth of Mispillion Creek, Delaware.—To protect the bank from abrasion from the sea, a line of sheet-piling 203 feet long was placed on the bank of the creek. Near the northeast corner of the bank, where the sea-wash had made a hole, the site was protected by sheet-piling along the back of the drag-log, as well as in front of the stringer, and the space between was filled in with mud, with stone on top. The structures were painted inside and out, a new pump was placed in the cistern, and various minor repairs were made. The boundaries of the site were marked with stone monuments.

An. Rep.  
1885 269. Mispillion Creek, at mouth of Mispillion Creek, Delaware.—Some 60 tons of riprap were placed around the banks of the station to protect them from scour and ice.

280. Mispillion Creek, at mouth of Mispillion Creek, Delaware.—A An. Rep.  
1888 brush and stone protection was placed in front of the banks, and the lightning conductor was supplied with new ground connection.

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1891. 327. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—Damages to the bulk-head and bunks, by the storm of October, 1890, were repaired, the height of the bulk was increased and the bunks were protected with stone rip-rap and facing. The site was partially filled with gravel and graded, and repairs were made to the board walks. A small frame kitchen was added to the dwelling and the frame stable was rebuilt.

1892. 355. Mispillion Creek, at mouth of the creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—A portion of the site was filled in with gravel and it was graded.

1893 371. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—A narrow red sector was placed in this light, to mark the line of turning into Mispillion Creek.

1895 384. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—A portion of the bunks surrounding the station was rebuilt, and small repairs were made.

1896 416. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—An extra water tank was furnished, the river bunks were strengthened and repaired, and various repairs were made.

1897 429. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—The high dike around the site, the stone riprap on its bay front, and the new water tank were completed. Extensive repairs were made.

1898 450. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—About 12,100 bushels of oyster shells were used in repaving the road. Various repairs were made to the tower and house.

1899 462. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—About 12,000 bushels of shells were placed upon the road which leads across the marsh to the light-station. Various repairs were made.

1900 470. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—About 1,000 bushels of oyster shells were placed upon the road across the marsh to the light-house. A splashboard 3 feet high and 320 feet long was placed along the top of the front and right bunks, and earth was filled in along its base. Various repairs were made.

1902 486. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—The road leading across the marsh to the light station was repaired by applying to its surface about 350 bushels of oyster shells.

1903 503. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—A topographical survey of the light-house site was made, and the southerly boundary stone, which had been undermined by the water, was reset. Various repairs were made.

1904 505. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—The topographical survey of the station made in June, 1903, was plotted. The bank sluice was repaired.

1907 517. Mispillion Creek, Delaware Bay, Delaware.—A change was made in February, 1907, in the position of the red sector of this light, so that its southerly edge indicates the recently dredged channel. Some 8,475 bushels of oyster shells were delivered in May, 1907, for repaving the roadway. The owners of the steamers completed the work of repairing the injury to the sea wall made by those vessels. A row of fender piles was driven in front of the sea wall. Various repairs were made.